

Black Willows

Bob Wands

Three years of Thursday evenings at the Junior College writer's group had given Tom some answers; if it weren't for the fact that Yvonne was hot blonde in a sweater and black jeans he wouldn't know she existed as anything material at all. She never used the word "think", only "feel", could hallucinate almost at will, and described the effects of poetry in ways that made him feel like they'd made love.

Her writing, complex and passionate, told dark tales of strange people who lived in worlds of broken glass and razors. It read like transcriptions of her daydreams, the mind plays she sometimes shared with him on rare evenings when the group let out early, and they could leave together, unhurried, and engaged in lively conversation. As they headed toward their cars, he would coax details from her voluptuous and violent imagination, while trying earnestly, and nearly always unsuccessfully, to avoid becoming distracted by her presence.

At these times he felt incidental, as he always did around Yvonne, but not invasive; the strange creations that filled her inner life were clearly her closest friends, and whatever lay outside of those was treated with a kind of polite neutrality. In fact, she was so abstract that even her own physical beauty seemed irrelevant, or at least inconvenient, and he'd learned to be embarrassed by the mere thought of touching her hand.

Yvonne was married, and much too happily, he thought, but that fact didn't dampen his desire at all. There had been moments when he wanted to say "Did you know that the only reason I'm alive is to want you?" Those were the times when she seemed to float under the yellow lights, when he could hear only his own footsteps on the parking lot, when even watching her delicate feet couldn't prove they touched the ground.

Tonight, they'd carried their conversation about a novel out the door of the classroom building and across the half-full lot. Yvonne paused by her car to put the finishing touches on a thought.

"I know the surface effect she was after, with the casualness of it, the callous feasting, but I felt something more -- gratitude of the slain for the slayer, a symbiosis of beast and prey, death as the greatest expression of love." He admired how she sounded, earnest, effortless; as he admired her cheekbones, reddening in the late March bluster. But she was leaving, so he reached for something to extend the moment.

"Aren't you extracting too much from a vampire novel?" He hoped this wouldn't sound overly dismissive. Horror didn't appeal to him very much; he thought it was an aberration with almost no artistic potential. But the subject always animated Yvonne, who seemed to see little difference between life and art, love and death, good and evil. They were

concepts she treated like recreational drugs, or good music, just more reasons to be carried off to her strange places.

"You mean novelist. And no, I don't think so. Sure, she's commercial -- just look at her last two books. But in all her work there's a place where the atmosphere makes the action look meaningless -- I mean, the body can only do so much. What tightens the chest, and makes the breath short, that's what the body can never have, ecstasy even once from one lump of flesh. Only the wanting is real, and release isn't holding the forbidden in your arms -- it's death."

On the horizon, the ragged purple clouds had begun to glow rosy. Tom interrupted. "Would you like to walk by the creek? Down to the black willows? We have enough time, I think, and the sunsets are starting to look like spring." This was the strongest pitch he'd ever made for a moment alone with her that wasn't just another step between the classroom and the car. She said, without hesitation, "Okay."

Tom felt like he'd grabbed a boiling pot without a hot mitt. This must be farce, a whim, an excuse to watch him twist. After all, he'd lobbed his best poetic shots in her front yard for three years and she hadn't flinched, always the faithful wife and mother, not even acknowledging that she was the object of his obsession. Once, after she'd read a thinly-veiled verse that sanctified her cleavage, she asked "Did you want me to critique it?" He turned away wordless, thankful for the distance to his car, the fifty feet across the parking lot, and all the bumpers, their various lengths and heights each reflecting differently the yellow lights that hung in clusters from the poles.

But of course, he would take this concession, for whatever it meant. It was better than trying to forget how foolish he felt, how trivial near her. Too many times, late at night, drunk and desperate, he'd looked for words that might reach her, might stir some reaction beyond genteel consideration and a certain obvious sisterly forbearance. Nothing had worked before, and he could see no reason to think too hard about what was happening now.

He stepped carefully off the asphalt onto the grass, and turned tentatively to offer a hand; but Yvonne was unconcerned, not even looking down at the foot high curb, but seeming to find her way over on the air above it. They continued down a shallow slope that ended in the trees by a noisy creek. This was a sound they'd heard in the distance a year before, when he first pointed out the grove, and how it had been left standing not for its twisted beauty, but only because it hugged the water, on soft flood plain unsuitable for cars.

She was always polite during his little insights, flattering with her odd light eyes. No matter how often he'd seen them, he could never recall their color. The best impression was translucence, a sense of seeing through, soft, unfocused, at something not quite real. Even now he made a mental note: with the sun poised at dusk, and she bound to face him, he would look in those eyes again.

Yvonne stopped at the largest willow, and leaned back, hands folded behind her against the thick broken ropes of bark. Her coat fell open. This was a dream he'd awakened from a hundred times, wet, ashamed, and hating that he held no part of her in hand or mouth. Now, for whatever reason, she seemed to be inviting the lust that broke out in sweat across his palms and upper lip.

Turning to the red-gray west, she spoke:

"Imagine a creature of desperate thought who can only survive on the blood of a living heart. It would manifest itself as something utterly enticing, but never feel at home in a body. Each victim would mean sweet release from the hard world for a time, and leave a taste of the only true love, the total surrender of flesh to death."

She turned to him. He looked up quickly. Above the pale skin of her throat, above the high, wind-reddened cheeks, he met her eyes.

They were black.

He wanted to stop every sound, the cars, the noisy birds, the wind that scraped the budding willow limbs together.

All of this happened, and again there came noise, shaped with a tongue that seemed to move in a too-full mouth. What he heard made him weightless.

"There have been hundreds, each like you, willing to shame themselves like schoolboys for me."

You have been in my thoughts always, forbidden, wanted.

"Imagine destroying them all, each fool that had to have me."

No man has taken greater strength to deny.

"They all wrote poetry, and said that I was more than life."

I've heard the passion captured in your words.

"But a single heartbeat gave me more than all their verse."

Now I need to feel how much you can love.

The fortress Yvonne, to which he had laid siege for three years, had finally collapsed. She knew now that he was no fool, unfit to even score the game, but artist, genius,

worthy lover. Finally, he could look at her unmocked, unwounded, wanted. Finally, he could touch her.

In the first and last decisive act of his life he reached forward and placed a hand on each side of her face. The sweat on his palms froze with the crackle of cellophane, and he began to pull her head, with its opening mouth, fanged and wet, to his neck. She hissed; his skin burned numb. Pierced, arched back, shocked for a moment blind, he felt her catch him at the waist, then slide down the bark to sit, cradling, an obscene pieta, bent to her ancient tending.

He could hear the creek, the cars on the highway at the top of the hill, the muscles in her throat, swallowing. He forced his eyes open. Over the parking lot, through the screen of budded willows, yellow lights hung by the score from tall poles. He started counting, determined to number them all, one for each beat of his heart.